

# Jewish Nationalism: A Reading of Ludwig Lewisohn's *The Island Within*

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Throughout his long career as a Jewish-American writer, Ludwig Lewisohn occupied himself intensely with the issue of assimilation and the need to preserve one's cultural identity. His main concern was the fate of the Jews in America, but he was convinced of the indispensable value of the particular traditions and folkways of all ethnic groups and rejected the ideology of the melting pot. The exceptional fervor of his commitment to everything Jewish can perhaps be explained as a compensation for the fact that he was raised as an American and Methodist. His parents were assimilated German Jews who came to America when Lewisohn was eight years old.

In *Up-Stream* (1922), the first part of his autobiography, Lewisohn explains that he always felt excluded from the circles of his non-Jewish class-mates because of his background. Later on he tried to pursue an academic career as a teacher of English literature, but he gave up this because of what he believed was anti-Semitic prejudice directed at him. In *Up-Stream* he describes his own experience with bitter irony: "We boast our equality and freedom and call it Americanism and speak of other countries with disdain. And so one is unwarned, encouraged and flung into the street."

In *The Island Within* (1928), his best-known novel, Lewisohn concentrates on an American Jew, Arthur Levy, who cannot help noticing the subtle barriers that exist in America for people of Jewish origin. Among other things, the novel is an attack on all forms of anti-Semitism, and it has obvious autobiographical elements. Arthur's father is a Jew who had lived in Germany before he went to America. In this book, Lewisohn develops fully his views on the value and significance of Jewishness in fictional form. The result is a novel passionate in its sensitivity to prejudice and its demand for full equality

and justice for all minority groups. In this respect it is more relevant and topical than ever.

The first two books of the novel explore Arthur's family history, the German and Polish environment of his grandparents and their parents. In this way, Lewisohn traces the process of assimilation and secularization back to its roots in the first half of the 19th century. The process coincides with a general growth and influence of scientific rationality which was and still remains a fundamental challenge for all religious and ethnic orthodoxies. Lewisohn is more nationalist than orthodox, and this makes him focus on psychological rather than theological issues in his attempts to define and defend the Jewishness of his characters. *The Island Within* is the record of his attempt to establish an ethnic awareness and sense of identity which does not depend on the religious heritage, and the novel illustrates both how difficult this is and the intensity of Lewisohn's commitment to the Jewish cause. In the process, he must have felt that he was going against the trend of experimental literature of the twenties in writing a realistic novel with a clear message. He refers to Joyce's *Ulysses*, obliquely, and apparently also to the work of Proust, rejecting their modes in favor of a more traditional "epic note" which sets out to "teach by example."<sup>2</sup> This the novel surely does, and it is a source of its strength as well as its weakness. Occasionally, the guiding hand of the didactic author is too visible, and the realistic illusion suffers from this. According to Frederick J. Hoffmann, "the hero becomes the instrument of Lewisohn's polemic purpose."<sup>3</sup>

Lewisohn feels that no Jew is ever safe in his land of exile and that assimilation is an illusion. This is made quite explicit in the author's introduction to book two of the novel. Speaking of the Jews, he states that "nowhere have they yet found the rest of either tolerance or land." But he is ambiguous in his speculations on the meaning of civilizations and nationalities. About the Germans, for example, he first argues that they are apt to merge with the Americans of English descent in America but preserve their identity in Brazil. Later, he asserts that one cannot deduce any theories of national identity from such observations. Nevertheless, Lewisohn tends to use ethnic or national labels when he tries to explain the fate of the Jews. The marriage between Arthur and Elizabeth fails because of some profound difference in their dispositions which seems to be essential to their ethnic backgrounds.

In the essay preceding book three the national character of the Jews is described and the causes of its being are outlined. The basic feeling of the Jew, says Lewisohn, is a sense of inferiority, and this bold statement is followed by a short but vivid account of the historic

causes of this predicament. It derives from "One thousand years of intermittent persecution." However, Lewisohn undercuts this explanation by stating that the Jewish people were "a feeble folk" from the start, a tribe who never managed to create a secure nation for themselves. They were poor fighters and inept in the practical sphere. Because of their many defeats, they compensated by developing an alternative set of values in which "victory is defeat and success failure." In his analysis of causes, Lewisohn wavers between external, historical factors and a belief in some kind of innate quality, a certain feebleness and otherworldly tendency. But though he is ambiguous about causes, he believes firmly in the fundamental differences between peoples and ethnic groups and analyzes his fictional characters in terms of features of this sort.

The *Island Within* sets out to demonstrate that Jews can never become wholly integrated into the larger society, but it also rejects orthodoxy, regarding it as untenable in the modern world. Inter-marriage does not work, but the Jews must adjust to their surroundings to some extent. This middle way is exemplified by Arthur's aunt Bertha and her husband Benjamin Krakauer. He is a university teacher and his children go to German schools, but at home they eat kosher food and learn Hebrew. They are enlightened enough to reject the notion that all the dietary laws are of divine origin, but they preserve the customs because they regard it as essential that the "spiritual integrity and solidarity" of the Jews should be maintained. It is because he strays too far away from this path that Arthur has to learn his lesson the hard way.

Arthur's entire life up to his divorce is dominated by his futile struggle to free himself from the constraints of his ethnic background. But even as a small boy he knows that he is different, a Jew, although there is no visible evidence of this in his house. When he looks back on his childhood and speculates about the origins of this awareness, he feels obliged to attribute it to "ancestral memories, to instinct, to the voice of the blood." Paradoxically, this theory is identical with the racial doctrines of Nazi Germany and suggests that such ideas were quite widespread during the twenties and thirties.

To be a Jew means that one has an inborn sense of alienation from the non-Jewish world. Arthur recalls how he used to imagine, when playing, that his house was an isolated fortress in the midst of a hostile and lonely world. Therefore he immediately realizes the full significance of the word "Sheenie" when it is spat out against him by one of his class-mates. But even at this early age he is too proud to report the

incident to his mother. He refuses to recognize it and decides to shut it out of his consciousness. In this way he establishes his habit of denying reality as far as questions of Jewishness and anti-Semitism are concerned. But the point is driven home, perhaps a little too emphatically, in the novel. Arthur becomes friends with George Fleming, the boy who had called him names, and invites him home. Without realizing it, he does so because of a desire to be accepted by the gentiles and escape from the fate which he knows, deep within him, to be his. In typical, or rather stereotypical fashion, George romps and wrestles and upsets the more refined Jewish children. When Arthur reaches ten, he feels "the eternal zeal of learning in his soul" and is waylaid on his way from the library by raw-boned gentile children who frighten and tease him about his books.

Lewisohn was ahead of his time in his strong commitment to ethnic values, and he was also a nationalist. In his view, peoples have a right and a duty to preserve their nationhood, and he defends the Pharisees because they were nationalists in their resistance to Roman influence. Peoples are organic entities with a desire to live and preserve their uniqueness. Both oppression and assimilation threaten to extinguish the smaller and less powerful nationalities and thus disrupt the natural harmony of many different peoples living together in a harmonious fashion. Lewisohn envisages such a harmony and asserts that it is superior, both culturally and morally, to the mere size and power of mundane empires. These need to be saved from their own follies by "the fellowship of the weak," who by virtue of their lack of power have preserved different and superior values. The Jewish nation is Lewisohn's main example of this, but he also includes all other nations in his vision of the beauty of cultural pluralism. His enemy is the imperialist nation, of any political persuasion, which insists on moulding other nations or ethnic groups in its own image. He mentions fascist Italy and the Austro-Hungarian empire as examples, and he is clearly sceptical of Germany, England and America as well. His hostility towards his own country derives not only from his encounters with anti-Semitism, but also from his experiences during World War One, when he was regarded as pro-German because of his family background.<sup>4</sup>

Following in the footsteps of Theodore Burghammer, an uncle of his who had been baptized and had changed his name, Arthur attaches himself to the other students at Columbia University and imitates their reserved demeanour and unwillingness to show their true feelings. Jews, it is suggested, are more open and emotional. In Bellow's

*Dangling Man* (1944), Joseph expresses the same view. Comparing himself to the tight-lipped heroes of Hemingway, Joseph rejects their code and asserts his intention of talking freely about his difficulties. Arthur, when he meets the over-eager, insanely talkative Victor Goldmann, recognizes a tendency in himself to talk too much and dominate his surroundings with his ego. He is ashamed of this trait and begins to realize that his gentile friends draw the line against him when it comes to inviting him to their homes. A few words of rebuke from his friend Charles Dawson are enough to send Arthur into the depths of despair, and he feels excluded and isolated.

Walking along the river, he unwittingly feels the alienation and melancholy that are the lot of every Jew in *diaspora*. Everything he sees is "in some fashion that he did not understand divided from his soul," and he finds himself walking towards the house of the Goldmanns, fellow Jews. He is obeying the "instinct" which guides his father and following his counsel to stick to his own kind. The only safe island is within this group and within himself. However, Arthur fights the instinct and continues to argue with himself and others in an effort to convince himself that there really is no reason to believe that Jews are different from others. He is a prime example of the conflict between the head and the heart. He discusses his problems with Joe Goldmann and suggests that Jews are more like other people than they are different from them. Thus he misses the point that the difference, though relatively small, is vital and ineradicable. Joe is a radical who believes that all "racial and social prejudices" will disappear when socialism becomes victorious. But when Arthur asks him what is typically Jewish about the two of them, Joe's eyes reveal "their deepest melancholy." He, too, is haunted by influences which he vainly thinks can be eradicated by political means. In a polemic against Lewisohn's novels, Leslie Fiedler states that the Marxists in them are seen as "self-deceivers, attempting to conceal their personal anguish behind an artificial fog of social cant."<sup>5</sup>

Arthur approaches the issue of Jewishness in a scientific manner, studying anthropology, and he discovers that there are no pure races and that all men, including the Jews, are racial mongrels. Accordingly, there is no problem, he tells himself. In the light of scientific examination, concepts like Jewishness turn out to be devoid of meaning. But as Lewisohn sees it, Arthur underestimates the significance of the historic experience of the Jews. Though they have tried, in recent times, to blend into the cultures around them, it is a vain effort. They are still outsiders and observers in their relation to the histories of their

host countries. In "Stranger in the Village", written thirty years later, James Baldwin presented the same argument on behalf of the blacks and drew the same conclusion as Lewisohn.

According to the latter, the material and social gains achieved by the Jews in the last century must be weighed against the confusion and double alienation experienced by the modern Jew. He tries to assimilate, but is never sure whether he acts from a sincere wish to merge with the others or from an impulse to protect himself from persecution. No Jew can be a real patriot in wartime because he will always preserve a sense of detachment and a readiness to observe that the same barbarism flourishes on both sides of the front. In his eagerness to defend the Jewish heritage, Lewisohn sometimes provides arguments for the anti-Semites. In the propaganda of Nazi Germany, the Jew was portrayed as an alien and a parasite who could not be trusted.

Though he tries to fit in with the non-Jewish students, Arthur becomes upset when he realizes what assimilation really means. In order to be wholly accepted, the Jew must swear off his ethnic allegiance and give up his identity and his past. Someone like Charles Dawson, however, is entitled to his Scots ancestry and is proud of it. Arthur draws the conclusion that deep down, the Wasps are convinced of their racial superiority and that all others are allowed into their circles on their sufferance. But Arthur is still not ready to return to his native fold. In his case it takes a failed marriage to wake him up to the realities of the situation.

The marriage between Arthur and Elizabeth seems to herald a new future and a reconciliation between Jew and Wasp, but these two emancipated and modern people only succeed in deceiving themselves. They are both convinced that they have left their ancestral taboos behind, but there are subtle differences between them that make themselves felt from the start. These differences are a source of attraction for them, and Elizabeth tells Arthur that she loves his "Jewish darkness and ardour." However, Arthur is not quite satisfied with their love-making, feeling that Elizabeth is unable to shed her inhibitions. When it comes to sex, the Jew seems to stand in the same relation to the Wasp as the black man. Arthur is sceptical towards Elizabeth's protestant and puritan background, regarding it as too otherworldly compared to the Jewish tradition.

The attitude toward one's parents is also singled out as something that separates. Elizabeth is fond of her father, but there is a detachment in her attitude which is foreign to Arthur. There is more cohesion in

the Jewish family, and among Jews in general, than is the case with the Wasps. Suddenly Arthur sees his father in a new light, as a representative of the great and tragic tradition of the Jewish people, and he recalls that **all** the Jews he has known have shown an attitude of "reverence" toward their parents. In other words, it is the sacred duty of a Jew to honor his parents and carry on the tradition by marrying one of his own people. Similarly, for a Jewish father his child is of the utmost importance as a guarantee that the tradition continues. When Arthur learns that Elizabeth is pregnant, he is deeply touched and grateful, but she does not share his enthusiasm and is afraid that the child will prevent her from living her own life.

From the start, the two disagree about sex roles. Elizabeth argues from a feminist point of view and makes it clear that she intends to pursue her own career and that she resents what she feels is his male chauvinism, his tendency to regard her as "a nurse and a slave". She is far ahead of her time, sounding like an advocate of women's liberation of the nineteen-seventies or eighties. Arthur, however, is not merely sexist. He is a Jew, reaching on the basis of immemorial feelings and attitudes. He is also ready to accommodate Elizabeth in her desire for independence. But their attitudes toward children and family life remain different.

Arthur's parents do not approve of the marriage, but they accept it when they see that it is inevitable. At the same time, they understand the gap between the two cultures better than Arthur, with all his education and intelligence. His mother is sad, but patient in the manner of one who is used to bear burdens. Arthur senses this quality and is strengthened by contact with this "simple, gigantic patience that consented to the bearing of burdens." But he rejects this spontaneous, emotional agreement with his mother's point of view and again castigates himself, as a man with a scientific training, for letting himself be influenced by such irrational, tribal taboos. His learning process is still unfinished. In the last three books of the novel, the perspective becomes historical, and the Jewish people is seen against the background of the perpetual phenomenon of anti-Semitism. The weight of such a history is more than one man, Arthur Levy, can hope to remove.

Arthur becomes a psychoanalyst, and most of his patients are Jewish. Their problems all derive from their attempts to flee from the Jewish identity which is their inner reality. When Arthur and Elizabeth visit the Levys, the Jewish family members grieve because of the genteel lady's emotional reserve, and when little John Levy is

circumcised, Arthur is surprised at the depth of his satisfaction in becoming the father of a son. But he refuses to perceive the real nature of this feeling at this stage. He suffers because his wife is independent and rejects the traditional sex roles, and he tries in vain to find a solution.

He realizes that it would be unjust to try to force or subjugate her and wants to find a middle way between oppression and total emancipation. He is against both extremes. He only wants some kind of recognition of "the dominance of the male." This is accepted among Jews, but there the women are the rulers in their own spheres. Not only that, but they are happy in their position, according to Arthur. Elizabeth, however, reacts with horror to any scent of such attitudes, and her husband understands that this is only natural. As he sees it, the Wasps have subjected women rather than seeking their cooperation in the maintenance of traditional sex roles. Therefore, Elizabeth's behavior is understandable. The difference between the Jewish and gentile concept of the family is probably real, although Arthur's notions of married life among the Jews are idealized. The conflict between them ultimately stems from Arthur's unwillingness to give women equal rights. He criticizes Elizabeth for giving too much attention to her friends and work, implying that *his* work and needs are more important.

Unable to transcend his conception of the true sex roles, Arthur gradually concludes that he and his wife are incompatible because of their ethnic differences. In his view, and it is tempting to regard him as Lewisohn's mouthpiece, both here and elsewhere, Jews and Protestants are separated by an unbridgeable cultural gap. Each group or people lives in its own "stream," and it is unnatural to try to mingle the streams into one great river. The idea of the melting-pot is impossible, and each human being belongs within his or her kinship.

Arthur's development is like a psychoanalysis which he applies to himself, bringing himself to obey the reality principle and take the consequences of his Jewishness. He begins to read books about the Jewish people and to have some pride in his background. After *all*, his friend Dawson is proud of his Scots tradition, and Elizabeth is firmly rooted in her American Puritan background. It is only the Jews who try to wipe out their identity completely, an "unhuman" effort. The terrible cost of such an escape becomes evident when Arthur's sister Hazel returns to her parents and suffers a nervous breakdown because of her isolation as a Jew and housewife in a non-Jewish neighborhood in Boston. She is saved when her husband decides to move his family back into a Jewish neighborhood. To make sure that nobody



misses the message, Lewisohn has Victor Goldmann, the promising architect, commit suicide as a result of his attempt to obliterate his Jewishness and become an "Anglo-Saxon gentleman." Instead, he succeeded only in hating himself.

At a Jewish hospital, Arthur meets rabbi Moshe Hachohen, who becomes his guide and mentor on his journey back to his heritage. The rabbi is an embodiment of the tribe and teaches Arthur the basic Jewish truths. For a Jew, there are two basic aspects that must be considered and which contain hope as well as despair. One is the faith in the Messiah who will come one day and create a better world, and the other is the inevitable, persistent presence of anti-Semitism, in all ages and places. Through the rabbi, Arthur is brought close to his heritage and finds "a source of spiritual rectification."

Arthur and Elizabeth are divorced without rancor, and in book nine he receives his final lesson. It consists of his reading about the atrocities against the Jews that were committed by German crusaders during the middle ages. In all its horror, it is the basis for any true perception of the Jewish situation in diaspora. The tale changes Arthur's previous understanding of the crusades. Now, for the first time, he realizes that history is a "falsehood" for the Jews, having been written without bothering about their point of view, or that of any other minority. Arthur's reflections on the history of his people are prophetic: "Yesterday in Russia, today in Rumania, tomorrow where?" Only a few years after the publication of *The Island Within*, the greatest pogrom of all got under way in Germany.

At the end, Arthur decides to go to Rumania and help the persecuted Jews there. In this way, he will both learn more about his people and contribute his share of the solidarity that is needed and required. Thus he overcomes his sense of alienation and feels that the sky is "curved over him like a tent." Only when Jews unite and acknowledge their heritage can they hope to obtain any sense of security.

Though nothing is said about Arthur's future, it does not seem right to assert that the novel's message is that "survival is only possible in Palestine."<sup>6</sup> This homeland is not mentioned in the text, and the ending suggests that Arthur will return after his mission to Rumania is completed. He may continue his American life, but with a new awareness of his identity.

## NOTES

1. Quoted in *Jewish-American Literature: An Anthology of Fiction, Poetry, Autobiography, and Criticism*, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York, 1974), p. 202.

2. *The Island Within* (New York 1928, rpt. 1975), pp. 6-7.
3. *Freudianism and the Literary Mind*, 2nd. ed. (Ann Arbor, 1967), p. 284.
4. See Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of our Own Time: 1912-1917* (Chicago, 1959), p. 379.
5. *Jewish-American Literature*, p. 583.
6. Allen Guttman, *The Jewish Writer in America: Assimilation and the Struggle for Identity* (New York, 1973), p. 103.